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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 PRAGUE 000113

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STATE FOR EUR/NCE

E.O. 12958: DECL: 02/19/2018

TAGS: PREL PGOV EZ

SUBJECT: CZECH PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION: A TAINTED VICTORY  
FOR VACLAV KLAUS

REF: PRAGUE 88

Classified By: A/DCM MICHAEL DODMAN FOR REASONS 1.4 (B) AND (D).

¶1. (C) SUMMARY: As expected, Czech President Vaclav Klaus was reelected for second five-year term on February 15. The drama surrounding this second election was no longer about whether the voting should be open or secret, but about an absent Green Party deputy and a Social Democrat (CSSD) deputy who was expelled from the CSSD parliamentary caucus because he voted for Klaus. Klaus' narrow victory leaves the Czech political scene unsettled, with all five parties in the parliament having been bruised by internal disputes and tainted by allegations of vote buying, bullying, and other unsavory pressure tactics. Although relations between PM Topolanek's Civic Democrats (ODS) and the Greens are frosty at the moment, the coalition should be able to survive the political upheaval surrounding the presidential election, if for no other reason than a lack of better political options.  
END SUMMARY.

ODS CHANGES TACK ON BALLOTS AND KLAUS SAILS TO VICTORY

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¶2. (C) The mood of the February 15 election was palpably different from the frantic and tense atmosphere of the first election on February 8-9 (reftel). The calm was mainly due to the fact that Klaus' victory was clear even before balloting began. ODS was so certain of Klaus' victory that it no longer fought for a secret ballot, thus eliminating the chief source of the drama and discord surrounding the first election. Not even the presence of a third candidate, the Communist nominee Jana Bobosikova, provided much excitement. From the start, Bobosikova's nomination was viewed as little more than a negotiating tactic by the Communists (KSCM) and as an attempt by Bobosikova to raise her profile before next year's elections to the European Parliament, for which she is planning to run again. Bobosikova's decision to withdraw before the first round of voting only confirmed this assessment.

¶3. (C) What little drama there was concerned the absence of one Green deputy, who was reported ill, and the pro-Klaus stance of one CSSD deputy, who was duly expelled from the CSSD parliamentary caucus for his unorthodox views. Both these cases have added fuel to long-running internal disputes within the Green and CSSD parties (see below), but on February 15, they helped Klaus get reelected. Whereas a week before Klaus fell one vote short during the third round of the first election, on February 15 he had a vote to spare. The third round result, in an open vote, was 141 for Klaus, 111 for Svejnar. Klaus was officially proclaimed the winner and delivered a short address thanking his supporters and promising to be a president of all Czechs.

KLAUS AND ODS STILL LOSE

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14. (C) Following an election filled with allegations of corruption and pressure tactics including bullets and threatening SMS messages being sent to several parliamentarians, it is not surprising that most Czechs view the election as nothing short of a complete embarrassment. Klaus probably spoke for many Czechs when he said in his short post-election address that "it is necessary to put this election behind us and look ahead." While this may be good advice, the two elections will undoubtedly add to the disenchantment most Czechs feel about their political leaders and parties. Although the presidency and Klaus personally have been consistently highly rated in public opinion polls, both will likely suffer as a result of the past two weeks. Klaus also cannot claim a strong mandate, given the close vote, the role of the renegades in his reelection, and the surprisingly strong performance of his challenger, Jan Svejnar.

15. (C) PM Topolanek's ODS obviously has some reason to celebrate in the aftermath of the elections. The party managed to secure reelection for its honorary chairman, Klaus, and it did so without the support of the Communists. The Communists' support in the 2003 election helped Klaus get elected, but it also became a source of constant criticism and unfavorable comparisons with his strongly anti-Communist predecessor, President Vaclav Havel. Klaus' victory, however, was accompanied by a public war of words between ODS' two leading men, PM Topolanek and Prague Mayor Pavel Bem. Although the two quickly managed to kiss and make up -- at least in front of the cameras -- it is clear that Topolanek does not have the ODS reins of power firmly in his grasp and will likely face a challenge at the next ODS party

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congress this fall from Bem or someone else. ODS' father-figure Klaus could significantly influence how any possible ODS shake-up would play out, and it remains to be seen whether his strained relations with Topolanek will improve following his reelection or further deteriorate as a result of the less than dignified way Klaus' victory was secured.

KDU-CSL AND GREENS' WOES

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16. (C) The Christian Democrats (KDU-CSL), one of the three parties in Topolanek's coalition, displayed its internal divisions and deteriorating political power during the presidential election. The party split its votes between Klaus and Svejnar, despite an earlier decision by the party's leadership urging its parliamentarians to vote for Klaus. The party appears to be in limbo, hopelessly split between supporters of the current party chairman, Jiri Cunek, and the former chairman and current Minister of Finance, Miroslav Kalousek. Cunek continues to press hard to reclaim his cabinet seat in order to shore up his position within the party in advance of the April KDU-CSL congress. Topolanek again signaled after the February 15 election that he would not object to Cunek's return. The Greens have moderated their anti-Cunek statements recently, and from their weakened post-election position they may no longer be able to stop Cunek's return. However, KDU-CSL's problems run deeper than the present Cunek vs. Kalousek split. Its sliding poll numbers and a lack of new leaders threaten the party's existence. DPM Alexandr Vondra recently told Ambassador Graber that KDU-CSL faced a real danger of dissolving into a regional party, centered in the eastern portions of the country.

17. (C) The Greens are clearly the biggest losers of the three parties in the Topolanek coalition. Not only did their candidate, Jan Svejnar lose, but during the campaign and especially during the first election on February 8-9, the Greens undermined their position vis-a-vis ODS and Klaus.

Their unexpected support of open balloting and overly personal attacks on Klaus embittered most ODS members, who felt betrayed by the small coalition partner and who had always considered Topolanek as having been overly generous last year when he gave them four ministerial posts, including the high profile foreign ministry, in exchange for six votes in the parliament. Topolanek acknowledged to Ambassador Graber that even though he may be able to settle things on a personal level with Green Party Chairman and DPM Martin Bursik, many ODS members were "taking it hard." This was apparent in a vote on a piece of environmental legislation that took place during the week that followed the first presidential election. Initially, ten ODS deputies voted against the legislation, which was a key priority for the Greens. Had Topolanek not intervened at the last moment, their obstruction would have caused the legislation to fail. The Greens are steeling themselves for further such retributions, especially from Klaus. In a recent meeting with Ambassador Graber, the Green Party leadership was concerned about an anti-discrimination bill, which is required by the EU and which they expect Klaus may veto when it reaches his desk in March.

¶18. (C) Another victim of the presidential election was the Greens' internal cease-fire, which they managed to reach after weeks of infighting following Dana Kuchtova's forced resignation as Minister of Education last fall. Bursik sharply criticized the missing Green deputy, Olga Zubova, for her absence and the manner by which she notified her party colleagues that she was ill (via a last minute SMS). From Bursik's perspective, Zubova undermined the Greens' united stance in the election and helped Klaus. From the perspective of his detractors, Bursik went too far in putting politics above personal health of a colleague. The reopened divisions within the Green Party ranks will further weaken the party's position within the coalition, with Bursik's attention and energies being diverted to quelling another mini-rebellion within his unruly party.

#### THE OPPOSITION AT EACH OTHER'S THROATS

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¶19. (C) While both CSSD and KSCM could claim a modest victory in the undecided first election, i.e., preventing a Klaus reelection, the second election was a complete political disaster for both parties. Klaus was elected thanks to the latest CSSD "renegade" deputy, Evzen Snitily. That brings the total of CSSD renegades to three, including the two on whose votes the Topolanek government depends. As CSSD continues to bleed renegade deputies, many within and outside

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the party are pointing the finger of blame at Jiri Paroubek, the party chairman. Although Paroubek has tried to accuse the ODS of dirty tricks and blackmailing Snitily, the fact remains that Paroubek appears not to be in full control of the party and has alienated many of the rank and file with his penchant for pressure tactics, which were on full display during the presidential election. With the presidential election disappointment, Paroubek has added another loss to his record. He will face CSSD party elections next spring and will therefore be under increasing pressure from within the party to deliver in the fall regional elections and on other priority issues.

¶10. (C) The KSCM suffered an even worse loss than the CSSD. Their inflated demands and overstrategizing between the two elections yielded nothing but embarrassment. KSCM Chairman Vojtech Filip, facing dissent within his own ranks, managed to push through Bobosikova's nomination. While this may have seemed like a clever strategic move to force the CSSD and Greens to commit to an anti-MD stance, it completely backfired. While CSSD had no problem making such a commitment, the Greens held their ground and refused to yield to KSCM's "blackmail." The Communists can console themselves with the fact that they did not vote for Klaus, but that may

be too little for a party that was on the brink of emerging from the ostracized political position it has occupied since 1989. For the first time, CSSD was willing to consider KSCM as an acceptable coalition partner on the regional level, following the fall elections. As a result of KSCM's obstructive actions during the second presidential election, that deal is off. Indeed, the relations between CSSD and KSCM took a nose-dive, with both Filip and Paroubek blaming the other for the electoral failure. Filip, who also faces party elections this spring, will have a hard time explaining the mismanaged election strategy to his party comrades.

COMMENT

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¶11. (C) Immediately following the February 15 election, many of the leading politicians departed for ski vacations. There is some truth in the words of Minister Cyril Svoboda, who told Ambassador Graber during the election: "it will be better for all of us to take one week off and be apart." That time apart should soothe some of frayed nerves and help the coalition refocus on the work ahead. Nothing will mend fences better than progress on the coalition's legislative agenda. The next big test for the coalition will be MD and the second round of reforms planned for this year. MD especially will be a tough fight, but the Greens' principled stand on this issue during the presidential election is encouraging. Finally, despite the unhappiness with the Greens inside the ODS, the three coalition parties really do not have any good alternatives to the present arrangement. Although speculations about a possible grand coalition between ODS and CSSD periodically emerge, Paroubek vehemently rejected such a scenario in early February. From a political standpoint, CSSD will be much better positioned for the 2010 elections if it remains in the opposition, where it has seen its poll numbers climb far above ODS. In a recent meeting with the Greens, Ondrej Liska quipped that as a result of the presidential election, "the coalition turned from a love affair into a marriage." Maybe a marriage of convenience would be a more apt description for the Topolanek coalition. Graber